MEET THE MUSAHARS
UNDERSTANDING MUSAHAR MARGINALIZATION
IN NEPAL

SUMMARY REPORT, AUGUST 2017

Marginalized among the marginalized

Musahars are the most politically marginalized, economically exploited, and socially ostracized group in Nepal.

Ritually oppressed through a system of caste segregation that considers them as untouchable, the Nepal Multidimensional Index, a synthesis of indicators on social standing, ranks Musahars as the lowest on not one, but almost all indicators. In the educational dimension, a composite of access, enrolment and literacy, they rank 96 out of 97; in the economic dimension, a composite of measures of economic opportunity, poverty and standard of living, they rank 97 out of 97; and in the gender dimension, comprising measures of gender related violence, control over marriage related decisions and control over reproductive decisions, they rank 96 out of 97. The Musahars are the only group that consistently rank in the bottom three on all interrelated measures (NSII 2014).

Musahars suffer extreme exclusion from education and employment due to their untouchable status. Despite the abolishment of untouchability in the Government of Nepal Constitution in 1963, and again in 1990, the practice of untouchability prevails all over the country; Musahars continue to be considered as untouched even amongst the untouchables, the lowest of the lower (Action Aid 2012, CBS 2001). Musahar communities are therefore often on the peripheries, in remote, hard to reach areas, isolated from other communities and unable to access water sources; sanitation and hygiene services; or health, education and transport services (Giri 2012).

> "People from other communities treat Musahars as untouchable. They don't let us enter the temple and they call us dirty. Some people won't even drink tea or eat food served by a Musahar."

99.4% of Musahars are entirely landless; most remain trapped in debt bondage, with generations of Musahars born into a tradition of bonded labor that persists despite its criminalization in 2002 (CBS 2011, Giri 2012, UNFCO 2013). Though the Government of Nepal initiated rehabilitation programs for former bonded laborers, studies show that a blanket ban of bonded labor has resulted in a failure to find less exploitative alternatives (Giri 2012). The Musahars are one of many marginalized groups forced back into the physical and psychosocial risks of debt bondage, in the absence of interventions that address exploitative modes of production and poverty (Dhakal 2007, Giri 2012).

> "I rear some buffaloes and to feed them I must cut grass from the landlord's land as I don't have my own land. If the landlord finds me cutting grass from their land, he beats me and grabs the grass from me."

Girls and women bear the brunt of the oppression of Musahars. Girls are often forced into early marriage, engaged in domestic work and wage labor, and led into bonded labor to support families to pay off impossibly large debts; 100% of Musahars are in debt with average interest rates of 40% (Bhandari 2016). Combined with fears for their safety and security outside their communities, where Musahars are often abused for daring to enter other areas, women and girls are also often victims of physical, psychological and sexual violence from their fathers and husbands, due to rampant alcohol and substance abuse in the community.

"Today I earned Rs. 2500 and spent Rs. 3000 on alcohol. I earned today, so I drank. I will earn tomorrow, and repay my Rs 500 debt."

The Right to Education

Education offers an alternative future; yet <u>only 4 percent of Musahar children are in school after age six, and 100 percent are out of school after age ten</u> (IIDS 2008). The <u>literacy rate is 7 percent amongst Musahars, and a mere 3.8 percent amongst Musahar women and girls</u> (CBS 2001). 85% are unable to read or write at all.

There have been various initiatives to improve access to education for Musahars; however, whilst some have demonstrated promising results, most have had limited impact. Despite the dire need, there are no current initiatives targeted at Musahars.

Giri (2012) asserts that a <u>dearth of research, and in particular, research that recognizes the voices and aspirations of Musahars,</u> has resulted in ad hoc, fragmented and failed interventions. Indeed, though there are notable studies on Musahars, namely Karna (2008) and Bandhari (2016), these have focused on the educational status of Musahars, without sufficient investigation of the factors that affect access and achievement in education. The methodologies and methods used in these studies have been quantitative rather than qualitative, limiting Musahar representation in the research, with the exception an ethnographic study of Musahar assessments of bonded labor by Giri (2012).

Meet the Musahars: Understanding Musahar Marginalization

"Meet the Musahars: Understanding Musahar Marginalization" involves research undertaken over nine months, between April 2016 and December 2016, in an attempt to address this dearth of research. The research centered on (i) understanding factors affecting Musahar access to education and (ii) understanding Musahar perspectives on exclusion and inclusion from education.

The study was carried out in two stages –

(i)   A community case study of factors affecting Musahar access to education conducted from April 2016 to June 2016, and comprising 107 semi-structured interviews and surveys of Musahar children, parents and teachers; and

(ii)   A participatory action research project conducted from July 2016 to December 2016, and comprising 85 in depth interviews and 15 gender balanced focus group discussions led by three Musahars trained and coached by Street Child and our partner organization.

Street Child conducted this study in collaboration with partner organization Janaki Women's Awareness Society, a grassroots, female-led organization with an enduring presence in the region since 1993. The partner was identified and selected for their vast experience and expertise in working with marginalized communities, and for their established ties and trust with Musahars in the region, supporting Street Child to access and interact with these communities. The partner was critical in the implementation of the research, supporting the translation of research tools, the implementation of the community case study through a team of surveys, and the training and support of Musahars for the participatory action research project.

This study is intended to contribute to the literature on Musahars; offer a unique perspective on the issues faced by Musahars to inform the design and delivery of programs; and inform the analysis and initiatives of other interested actors.

Understanding Access to Education

The first stage of the study involved a community case study of a Musahar population in Itharwa, Dhanusha. The case study is particularly relevant and appropriate for this research as it uses a variety of informational sources to construct a detailed description of a phenomenon where (i) the contextual conditions are critical to understanding; (ii) the distinction between the phenomenon and its contextual conditions is continuous rather than discrete; and (iii) the truth is characterized as pluralist and related to participant perspectives (with circular tension of subject and object) (Stake 1995, Yin 2006).

Though the findings are difficult to generalize due to contextual specificities, the case study adds critical understanding to existing literature, and in this case, contains elements that can be applied to other marginalized populations (Merriam 2001, Stake & Easly 1967). A hallmark of case studies is the use of multiple data sources; this study relies on both primary and secondary data using surveys and semi-structured interviews in the community for the former, and information from community organizations and available sources for the latter. This approach enabled triangulation of data in order to ensure consistent, relevant and reliable information to enhance the robustness of the research.

The outcomes of the case study are illustrated in the following framework for exclusion from education, that identifies characteristics operating within the community, home and school that affect access to education. This framework demonstrates the role of relational features in marginalization, acknowledging the interplay of various factors that reinforce the status of Musahars, rather than defining constraints solely in terms of material and cultural deprivation (Jha 2002, Sen 2000). The results 'reflect the overlapping nature of the disadvantages experienced by certain groups of categories of the population, with identity as the central axis' (Betts 2001, Kabeer 2006). By examining constrains operating at the level of community, home and school, their influence on decision making, and their impact on enrolment, attendance and retention, the analysis illustrates inclusion as a necessary condition for accessing education (Betts 2001, de Haan 2005, Jordan 1996, Nambissan 2003, Sen 2000).

In examining the community norms that constrain access to education, it is evident that their social status permeates all aspects of their participation. The Musahars are physically segregated from the general population, and live in separate clusters or colonies on the peripheries of other areas (Vasavi and Chamaraj 2000). Thus, primary and secondary schools in the area are still at an inconvenient or inaccessible distance for children, and their physical isolation accentuates their social isolation from other children.

As the practice of untouchability remains prevalent, particularly in rural and remote areas, despite its outlawing at the constitutional level, Musahars continue to be barred from using public services, accessing public institutions and interacting with other castes (Jha andJhingran 2002, Nambissan 1996). Though there

is a government school in the area surveyed in the study, this is attended by children from other communities, leading to fear of tensions amongst the Musahars.

Thus, although the concern of physical access is ameliorated, schools remain socially inaccessible due to their spatial distribution (Filmer and Pritchett 1999, Jha and Jhingran 2002, Kaul 2001, Nambissan 1996, Ramachandran Vimala, 2002).

"What is the benefit of sending Musahar children to school? In the name of Musahar children, Brahmin* children access schools that are in our communities. The teachers are also Brahmins."
*Brahmins are an upper caste community.

The economic cause is the most evident in explaining exclusion from education; caste and income are typically correlated, with caste and class inequalities tending to reinforce each other (Dreze and Sen 2005, Kingdon and Muzammil 2003, Nanchariah 2002). The Musahars are landless and illiterate, and schooling is the last priority in the face of financial exclusion (Jha and Jhingran 2002, Sen 2000). Extreme poverty prevents families from being able to meet the direct costs of schooling, including fees and uniforms. This lack of affordability leads to the decision not to attend; in some cases, students are able to enroll in school through government scholarships and subsidies, but are unable to meet ongoing costs and therefore drop out (Jha and Jhingran 2002, Nambissan 2003).

"How to send our children to school? I neither can fulfill my hunger properly nor can I wear proper clothes to cover my body. In such conditions, how to send our children to school? I can't afford sufficient food to eat, how to send children to school on an empty stomach? I can't afford stationaries, how how to send children to school to study?"

Schooling also represents an indirect cost for Musahars; where children are enrolled in school, the need for income generation is increased, and thus many Musahar children exhibit irregular attendance and drop out as a result of the time demanded by income earning activities (Nanchariah 2002, Pai 2000, Pal and Ghosh 2007, Teltumbde 2000, Tilak 2000, Townsend 2000, Velaskar 2010). Almost half of all children surveyed stated the need to earn income as the reason for failing to attend school, and numerous parents expressed preference for their children earning income or caring for younger siblings, and an inability to shoulder the opportunity costs of sending children to school.

"Why to send them to school? It is better to send them to India to earn instead; one of my sons is in India for earning. Everything is very expensive, at least he will have earning. Sometimes my younger children go to school, but when I work, one child must stay at home and look after the younger children."

The exclusion that the Musahars experience in the community is exacerbated in the school environment, facing significant social exclusion from instruction and curriculum that exclude them culturally and linguistically. Various studies of excluded castes reveal curricula that perpetuate messages of social inferiority of untouchable castes; entrenched as the principle of social stratification is, Musahar children

therefore often experience hostility and face frequent abuse from teachers and peers who
fail to treat them as equals (Jha and Jhingran 2002, Kaul 2001, Nambissan 2000, Probe Report 1999).

"They don't go to school even when I try to force them to. They would rather avoid the humiliation and stay at home."

Teachers tend to be of higher castes and tend to bring their own understanding of caste relations into the classroom, perpetuating stereotypes, subjecting Musahar children to sarcastic comments on their social status, verbally abusing and physically punishing them (Jha and Jhingran 2002, Nanchariah 2002, Vasavi 2003). Indeed, Musahar children face blatant forms of discrimination from teachers and peers: being made to sit separately in a corner of the classroom; being denied participation in group activities; being denied drinking water and being made to dine separately; and being denied aspects of teaching and learning from teachers who see Musahars, and girls in particular, as uneducable (Acharya 1987, Dreze and Kingdon 2001, Gupta 2001, Jodhka 2001, Nambissan 1996, 2004, Nancharaiah 2002, Shah et al 2006, Thorat, 2002).

Teacher absenteeism is rampant in Musahar communities, suggesting a lack of investment in the education of these students (Kabeer, 2000). Almost half of all parents surveyed stated that teachers were absent or inattentive, and often abusive, causing children to refuse to attend school, and leading parents to refrain from sending their children to school.

"Teachers don't care for Musahar children. I have never seen teachers teaching the students; the school is open from 10AM to 4PM, but the teachers only attend from 12PM to 2PM, or are absent. The teachers are in the fields to earn, and no one dares to take action against the teachers."

In addition to the monetary and opportunity costs of school participation, there is little interaction between Musahar and other children outside of school; thus, there is little pressure to enroll or attend. Rather, the experience of exclusion is aggravated in school, and leads to declining attendance rates and in many cases, drop out (Kaul 2001, Vasavi and Mehendale, 2003). Generational poverty leads to other factors that limit access to education. The majority of Musahars are illiterate; children in school are therefore first-generation learners who have to grapple with mastering language and cognitive skills without the critical support of their family, alongside the social discrimination they face (Dighe 2002, Dreze 2003). A number of parents highlighted their helplessness in being able to support or seek support for their children (Jodhka 2002, Nambissan 1996, 2000, 2003, Subramanian 1999, Visaria and Ramachandran 2003).

Thus, the discrimination endured by the excluded castes in the school and community, compounded by, and in some cases, preceded by, the constraints of the poverty, manifest in characteristics which heavily influence the decisions to enrol in, attend and continue schooling. Their positioning as a group further undermines any aspiration towards education, as the constraints they experience lead to collective decisions not to participate, overriding individual preferences and limiting opportunites (Jha and Jhingran 2005, Kaul 2001, Vasavi and Mehendale 2003).

Musahar Identity and Voice

In order to make a real difference, development research requires critical interrogation of both research results, and the research process itself. Apparent throughout the case study was the predisposition of both researchers and participants to default to assumptions: for example, in the case of the former, assumptions that that Musahars failed to value education, and in the case of the latter, assumptions that the researchers were representatives of the government, generating predetermined, and often hostile, responses.

It is critical therefore, to recognize that power is imbricated throughout the research process, and to examine the reasons for the research as much as the results. The literature is littered with research trapped in a paradigm that privilege researchers as objective, outsider experts, and reinforce perceptions of participants as passive and submissive. Thus, we hear only the voice of the researcher; dangerous both in the potential to oversimply categorizations of participant perspectives or reinforce stereotypes, denying the diversity and differences of opinion amongst participants, and to essentialize or romanticize participant groups.

Further, as Spivak (1988) observes, such articulations tend to be trapped in dominant vocabularies that presume universal principles, a notion that is often reinforced through apparently objective methodologies and methods of examining lived realities. This denies entry or ownership by marginalized groups, resulting in researchers talking to other researchers and restricting the dynamic potential of the research. For research to yield meaningful results, it must both challenge the tendency to constructing spaces for the other to speak, and to speak for the other. As Kapoor (2004) asserts, this requires reflectively, reflexivity and ethical engagement when undertaking research with marginalized groups where assumptions of the universality of concepts are often contested. It further requires that researchers relinquish power and control over certain spaces, and contend with uncertainty.

Understanding Musahar Perspectives on Exclusion and Inclusion from Education

Accordingly, the second stage of the study involved a participatory action research project of the identified Musahar population in Itharwa, Dhanusha.

Roberson (2000) describes participatory action research as 'the ultimate commitment to reflection and reflexivity', an approach that moves participants from the position of observer to researcher. It combines participation with action, and attempts to break down the distinction between the researchers and the researched, the subjects and objects of knowledge production by the participation of the people-for-themselves in the research process. In the process, research is seen not only as a means of gaining information, but as a catalyst for raising consciousness and mobilization for action (Gaventa 1993:19).

The principles of participatory action research support ethical engagement, as it: (i) recognizes a community as a unit of identity with a changing, independent and reactive voice; (ii) privileges the lived experiences and expertise of communities; (iii) is a collaborative enterprise, characterized by shared community ownership; and (iv) sees participants as co-researchers and therefore, agents for action and change (Kyrk 1948). It therefore uses inquiry and analysis to (i) reclaim identities; (ii) organize communities around common issues;

(iii) inform strategic action for social change; and (iv) encourage transformative understanding of the self and the other.

The outcomes of the participatory action research project are illustrated using the paradigm of redistribution and recognition (Fraser 1995). Three critical themes emerged through this stage.

The first offers insight into how Musahars understand education and its role in their lives. Rather than affirming the assumption that Musahars fail to value education, the participatory nature of the research revealed keen analysis of the irrelevance of education as it is offered to Musahar lives. Almost all Musahar parents demonstrated that their decision making was drawn from observations that (i) the teachers did not teach, but were frequently inattentive, late or absent; (ii) their children experienced exclusion and in many cases, abuse at school; (iii) education offered little access to employment opportunities; and that regardless, (iv) an educated status was an insufficient condition to overcome their untouchable status and social exclusion. It is clear therefore, that the decision to refrain from sending children to school arises not from apathy or a lack of awareness, but rather, engagement and assessment of the inherent and instrumental value of education.

"What shall our children do after receiving education? Even Grade 10 education is worthless. A man in my village has completed Grade 10, but he can't find employment even as a cleaner. There are no opportunities for us. We Musahars are not able to run a small tea shop because we are untouchables. Noone will drink tea prepared by us."

The second shows the interrelation of the economic and social exclusion and exploitation endured by the Musahars. Whilst their economic exclusion limits access to opportunities, the caste system segregates and ostracizes Musahars to the extent that they are considered as the other, dehumanized and stripped of dignity in a process of demarcation and differentiated that has endured over centuries. This specific social structure not only reinforces unequal and inequitable resource distribution, but rationalizes it through a narrative that paints Musahars as diminished and undeserving (Bulhan 1980).

"People can come at anytime and seize our shelters from us. The government doesn't help us, there is nothing given to poor people, there is nothing gained from giving to poor people. Musahars suffered through this monsoon, but no one from the government came. They only come when they want votes."

It is important to note here, that this unequal and inequitable resource distribution is replicated within Musahar communities, and in particular, in Musahar gender relations. Many girls and women who participated in the study spoke of the violence and abuse inflicted on them by their fathers and husbands, often as a consequence of rampant alcohol abuse.

Further, though it was evident that Musahars were more comfortable and open when speaking to their own due to the participatory nature of the project, there were nevertheless multiple insinuations that the Musahar researchers were working with the government or others to exploit, rather than assist them. Multiple participants expressed fear and frustration that recordings or photographs of them would be sold for the researchers to profit from, and referred to previous instances where their participation in research

conducted by community organizations and government representatives had raised their expectations, and resulted in no benefit to them, but rather to the organizations or representations.

> "Why should I allow you to record me? For 10 months the recording has been going on, but nothing has been done for poor people. You sell our recordings and earn for yourselves. People talk about us but no one does anything for us."

The third theme illustrates Musahar perceptions of their own abilities and agencies; the relentless denial of rights and dehumanization leading Musahars to believe that they are condemned to a thankless existence. Almost all Musahars expressed hopelessness and resignation, illustrating a collective conviction that has been stripped of its agency and ability to act autonomously.

> "This is the way of life of the Musahars. Being born as Musahars, we are born to suffer. We are not born to study; there are only torn and dirty clothes in our fate. I have never seen a Musahar succeed."

Redistribution and Recognition

Fraser, in her groundbreaking work, argues that there are two factors to injustice: economic injustice, and social injustice (1997). Whilst the former is rooted in exploitative labor arrangements, economic marginalization and material deprivation, the latter is derived from patterns of representation, interpretation and communication. In this case of the Musahars, this injustice is manifest in non-recognition and disrespect; an authoritative interpretation and communication that disparages or maligns their status, and a simultaneous silencing. Though in the real world, the two are always interimbricated and reinforce one another in a vicious circle, the distinction clarifies the central dilemma of the Musahars, whose struggle for social inclusion must be addressed, if their struggle for economic inclusion is to be successful.

Fraser asserts that 'justice requires both redistribution and recognition', where redistribution is a remedy for economic injustice that involves redistributing income, reorganizing the division of labor, subjecting investment to democratic decision-making, or transforming other basic economic structures. In contrast, recognition is a remedy for social injustice that involves cultural or symbolic change, that involves revaluing disrespected identities of maligned groups, or the 'transformation of societal patterns of representation, interpretation and communication in ways that would change everybody's sense of self'.

The Mushars are differentiated both by virtue of the political-economic structure and the cultural-valuational structure of Nepal, and therefore simultaneously suffer from economic maldistribution and social misrecognition in forms where neither of these injustices is an indirect effect of the other, but where both are co-original. In this case, redistributive remedies alone nor recognition remedies alone will suffice; in the case of the Musahars, recognition remedies are a critical precursor to achieving redistributive outcomes.

This research reveals, therefore, the task ahead: how can redistribution and recognition be realized for Musahars, who suffer multiple, intersecting struggles against multiple, intersecting injustice? How will we break the bonds of marginalization of the Musahars?

REFERENCES

Bulhan, H. (1985). Frantz Fanon and the psychology of oppression. 1st ed. New York [u.a.]: Plenum Press.

Cornwall, A. and Gaventa, J. (2001). Power and Knowledge. In: P. Reason and H. Bradbury, ed., Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice, 2nd ed. London: Sage Publications, pp.70-80.

Dalit Civil Society Organizations' Coalition for UPR, Nepal and International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) (2015). Human Rights Situation Of Dalit Community In Nepal. Kathmandu: Nepal National Dalit Social Welfare Organization (NNDSWO).

Fraser, N. (1997). Justice Interruptus. 1st ed. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.

Gaventa, J. (1993). The powerful, the powerless and the experts: knowledge struggles in a information age. In: P. Park, M. Brydon-Miller, B. Hall and T. Jackson, ed., Voices of Change: Participatory Research in the United States and Canada, 1st ed. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, pp.21-44.

Gormally, S. (2013). A social justice approach to community development. In: Working for Change: The Irish Journal of Community Work, 1st ed. Dublin.

Kanu, Y. (1997). Understanding development education through action research: Cross-cultural reflections. In: T. Carson and D. Sumara, ed., Action research as a living practice, 1st ed. New York: Peter Lang.

Kapoor, I. (2004). Hyper-self-reflexive development? Spivak on representing the Third World 'Other'. Third World Quarterly, 25(4), pp.627-647.

Kyrk, H. (1948). Resolving Social Conflicts: Selected Papers on Group Dynamics. Kurt Lewin. Social Service Review, 22(3), pp.405-406.

Mutua, M. (2001). Savages, Victims, and Saviours: The Metaphor of Human Rights. Harvard International Law Journal, 42(1), pp.201-209.

Noffke, S. and Somekh, B. (2009). The SAGE handbook of educational action research. 1st ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, pp.6-23.

Robertson, J. (2000). The three Rs of action research methodology: reciprocity, reflexivity and reflection-on-reality. Educational Action Research, 8(2), pp.307-326.

Spivak, G. (1988). Can the Subaltern Speak?. In: C. Melson and L. Grossberg, ed., Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, 1st ed. Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, pp.271-313.

Spivak, G. (1989). Who Claims Alterity?. In: B. Kruger and P. Mariani, ed., Remaking History, Dia Art Foundation, Discussions in Contemporary Culture Number 4, 1st ed. Washington: Bay Press, pp.269-292.

SRIF Secretariat (2008). Ethnographic study of Musahar Community with Emphasis on Female Group. Kathmandu: NP.